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ABSTRACT

The guide describes how committee hearings can be used in an educational as well as a political context. A committee hearing approach can be used in education (1) when a committee suited to carry out the evaluation task already exists; (2) when a written report is likely to be ignored or to have minimal effect; (3) when the decision-maker or impacted audience is hard to define and reporting fully would require multiple reports; (4) when consensus is needed; and (5) when evaluation is taking place in a highly politicized climate, and advocates of one perspective or another are likely to dismiss its findings. Specifically discussed in this guide are the characteristics of the committee approach, how to establish a committee and conduct a hearing, examples of using committees in evaluation, special considerations and how to "wing it," and possible variations of the committee hearing. A glossary of hearing related terms is also provided. (RM)

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EVALUATION GUIDES

Guide Number 8

COMMITTEE HEARINGS: THEIR USE IN EVALUATION

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The use of committee hearings as a new method of conducting and reporting evaluations is discussed, including:

- Key Characteristics of the Committee Approach
- When to Use the Committee Approach
- How to Establish a Committee and Conduct a Hearing
- Examples of Using Committees in Evaluation
- Special Considerations
- Variations on the Theme
- A Glossary

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KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COMMITTEE APPROACH

In 1973 the Senate Watergate Committee gave the world a dramatic example of the use of a committee as an investigative and evaluative tool. Selected by Congress, the committee members represented a wide cross-section of political, social, and cultural perspectives. In public sessions the committee members heard testimony from selected witnesses, raised questions of them, cross-examined them, and issued their own summary statements. While committee members followed a set of agreed-upon rules and procedures, and while they operated under the direction of an appointed chairperson (Sam Ervin), the Watergate hearings did not follow a charted course as they unfolded with each day's new evidence. The highly publicized hearings brought the chain of Watergate connections to light through a process that was credible far beyond what any private investigation might have achieved.

The appointed committee and the public hearing are tools that evaluators can use in an educational as well as a political context. The committee approach is a flexible one--the scale and the roles of the player can be altered to fit the situation. Committees composed of decision-makers and interested parties may be the ultimate phase and integral part of an evaluation, or the committee may be used to receive and respond to a completed evaluation study.

The key characteristics of the committee approach and suggestions about when to use this approach are listed below:

- All of those with a stake in the evaluation--decision-makers, evaluators, program personnel, clients, and other interested persons--are brought together in the same place at the same time for a careful review of the issues at hand.

- A public hearing with testimony, questioning, cross-examination, and summary statements produces a full exposition of evidence and illuminates differing points of view about that evidence.

- The committee hearing method consists of public, verbal, face-to-face interactions, and therefore generates a high degree of personal involvement. Consequently, committee hearings are likely to have a strong impact on those involved, as well as on those who observe them.

- Because interaction between different points of view takes place, a process of communication and education occurs, and the evaluation makes its impact as it is happening.

WHEN TO USE THE COMMITTEE APPROACH

Committee hearings may be useful:

- when a committee already exists and when that committee is, by logic or by mandate, most suited to carry out the evaluation task;
- when a written report is likely to be ignored or to have minimal effect;
- when the "decision-maker" or "impacted audience" is hard to define and reporting fully would require multiple reports;
- when the impact of the evaluation and its follow-through depends on the consensus of multiple perspectives, and such consensus is unlikely without significant interaction;
- when the evaluation is taking place in a highly politicized climate, and advocates of one perspective or another are likely to dismiss its findings.

HOW TO ESTABLISH A COMMITTEE AND CONDUCT A HEARING

There are essentially six steps in implementing the committee approach. This section describes the process, beginning with the decision to use this approach. (For more details, see the glossary).

1. Deciding to Use a Committee Approach

- The evaluator and client (parent body) decide that conditions merit the use of the approach.
- The basic format (committee, panel, public hearing) is decided upon.
- A charge to the committee is outlined.

2. Establishing a Committee

- The parent body selects committee members and determines how the chairperson is to be selected.
- A chairperson is selected (or appointed).

- The role of counsel is established and a person appointed.

- Other professional staff are appointed.

3. Background Work

- The focus of the evaluation is determined from the committee's charge, from the interests of the members, and from preliminary research.

- Briefing materials are collected and presented to committee members.

- Witnesses are selected.

4. Planning the Hearing

- An agenda is agreed upon.

- The hearing time is scheduled; room, facilities, equipment are procured.

- Witnesses are notified and informed of the rules.

5. Conducting the Hearing

- Opening statements are made by chairperson and committee members.

- Witnesses give statements, answer questions.

- Summary statements are made by chairperson and committee members.

6. Drafting the Report

- Initial drafts of the final report are made by the counsel and the chairperson.

- Drafts are reviewed in working sessions of the committee.

- The final draft of the report is submitted to the parent body, completing the charge of the committee.

EXAMPLES OF USING COMMITTEES IN EVALUATION

Example 1: Adopting a Textbook

In an Illinois school district the choice of the textbook to be used in the teaching of U. S. History was a traditional source of contention and difficulty. One year the existing textbook selection committee decided to use the committee hearing method to make the choice. As a "parent body" they appointed a committee of five district history teachers--a group that represented the diversity of views on the teaching of history. The committee was charged with the task of recommending one text for adoption.

The new committee selected one of their members as chairperson and asked the district director of curriculum to serve as "counsel" (advisor and investigator). A preliminary investigation--a needs analysis, reading analyses, and pilot studies--were carried out by the counsel and committee members. Three textbooks were chosen as final candidates to be investigated at a public hearing.

At the hearing the committee members heard testimony from witnesses who included sales representatives, teachers using the texts, their students, and a reading consultant. All witnesses were given a list of the committee's questions before the hearing and were invited to make short opening statements. Questioning of each witness was initiated by counsel and followed by the questions of each committee member. Counsel had the final opportunity to question witnesses to make sure that all salient points had been raised.

The method of using the committee and public hearing format appeared successful in that the committee was able to recommend a single text which they all could support. In addition, committee members said they knew more about the books than they ever had before, and that they had learned a great deal about each other's teaching perspectives.

Example 2: Evaluating the Evaluation

A State Department of Education (DOE) contracted with independent evaluators to carry out an evaluation of thirteen regional projects which provided educational services for handicapped students. In addition to submitting a written report, the evaluators agreed to present their findings to an appointed committee, and to discuss the methods and conduct of the evaluation.

To ensure a wide representation, the DOE appointed to the committee three of its own staff, three of the program staff, and three members of groups especially concerned with the education

of the handicapped. A member of DOE served as chairperson, and special "counsels" served as backup to the committee members, providing perspective from the particular constituency the member was representing.

The committee was charged with the task of "exploring the validity of the report, reviewing the report's recommendations, and providing written response to the evaluation."

The evaluators who had headed and carried out the evaluation were called as witnesses. They were served by a counsel who advised them on matters of contract and obligation. After opening statements, each witness received two rounds of questioning by committee members.

Following the hearing, individual committee members wrote individual reports. These were then compiled into one "meta-evaluation" report which was attached to the evaluator's report and submitted to DOE.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The committee approach is a complex and involved process. It is also new to most evaluators and their audiences. Therefore, caution should be exercised in deciding to use this approach. In this section caveats regarding this approach are presented, followed by suggestions on how one might "wing it" under less than ideal conditions.

Caveats

- Committee hearings require considerable time, both in the preparation and in the conduct of the hearing itself.
- Considerable cost may be incurred in hiring staff, procuring witnesses, holding the hearing, recording and transcribing the proceedings, and writing the final report.
- Developing rules of procedure and operating under the legal/congressional model is novel to both evaluators and school personnel. (All those who have tried the committee hearing format report spending considerable time trying to foresee the rules they would need, and they all experienced an initial awkwardness in operating in the new format.)

Evaluations which consist largely of technical data and which hinge on statistical interpretations are difficult both to present and to consider in a hearing format.

- Appropriate and thorough interrogation of witnesses is mandatory if all pertinent information is to be brought to light. Ineffectual questioning may focus on peripheral matters and leave significant issues unexplored.

- Summarizing committee hearings and reporting the outcomes to those who did not attend is difficult (an edited videotape of hearing highlights has been used successfully).

- Other dangers of the committee approach include domination by the chairperson (or other individuals), excessive conflict between members of the committee, unfair treatment of basically cooperative witnesses, and failure to attend to data presented with the committee coming to its own (unsupported) conclusions.

Winging It

The Congressional Select Committee has served as the model for the committee hearing procedures described in this report. It must be remembered, however, that the use of committees, panels, and trials in educational evaluation is very much in the embryo stage. Therefore, one should feel free to modify, alter, or extend the ideas presented here to fit the needs and resources of one's own situation. As long as the key strengths of the method are retained (the representation of diverse interests, the public presentation of evaluative evidence, and the questioning of that evidence from multiple perspectives), then the specific roles, forms, and procedures employed may vary freely. In those situations which lend themselves to the committee hearing method, one can only encourage its use and suggest that, as an experiment, it is likely to be of greater interest and value than a more traditional evaluation procedure.

VARIATIONS ON THE THEME

The "pure" committee hearing as discussed thus far is not the only way to implement a public session in which evidence concerning an evaluation is presented. Two other public forums, namely, the panel and the trial, also fall under this genre.

1. The Panel

The faculty advisors serving on a student's dissertation committee, esteemed scientists serving on a National Science Foundation Education panel, and a Presidential Blue Ribbon Panel of city mayors appointed to study the plight of the American inner city are examples of the use of the panel as an evaluative tool. Unlike the members of a committee who are appointed to

represent the spectrum of interests involved, the members of an advisory panel are appointed because of their experience and expertise in the field being studied.

Typically, the members of a panel are given the charge of monitoring or reviewing a situation, documenting what they see, and making recommendations for action. The panel approach is used in an area where subject matter expertise and experience is important; the approach can also bring multidisciplinary expertise to a situation and can incorporate nationally famous (expensive) expertise in a cost-effective way. Even a brief panel review can give fresh perspectives, cutting off past unproductive policies, and suggesting new directions for the future.

2. The Trial

When an evaluation is initiated by complaint or conflict, when an evaluation is taking place in an adversarial climate, or when there are two strongly opposed stakeholders in the outcome of an evaluation, the metaphor and format of the legal trial may be more appropriate than that of the Congressional Select Committee. Here the players consist of prosecuting and defense attorneys, judge, jury, and witnesses. Through a hard-fought fight of opposing interests, it is believed that the "truth" will emerge about the program or issue being contested. The use of the trial format requires a careful delimiting of the relevant issues and questions, the representation of separate interests, and the careful adherence to legal rules of procedure.

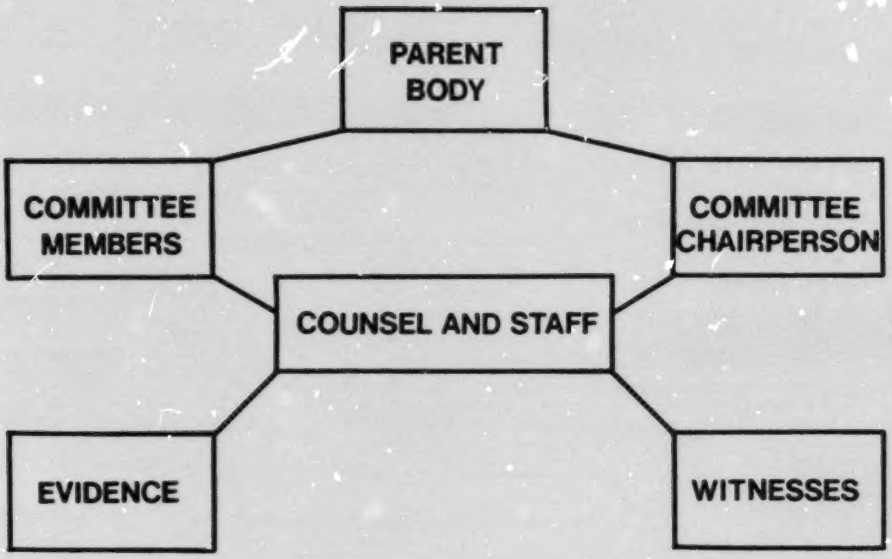
A GLOSSARY

This glossary has two parts. The first part is organized around Figure 1, which depicts the relationships among the various constituencies of a committee hearing. The second part of the glossary contains definitions of the major terms associated with a committee hearing.

Constituencies

The parent body appoints committee members and determines how the chairperson is to be selected. The chairperson selects and works cooperatively with the counsel. Selecting and overseeing the work of the staff, the counsel gathers evidence, helps to select witnesses, and briefs the members of the committee on both witnesses and evidence.

Figure 1



Parent Body

The individual or group authorizing the evaluation and appointing the committee members.

Committee Members

Committees are most effective when their members represent the whole range of significant constituent interests. Individual members should have the ability to frame reasonable questions and to probe issues thoroughly. Expertise in the relevant subject matter is a plus, but may not be necessary as counsel and staff can supply technical expertise.

Chairperson

Appointed by the parent body or selected by the members of the committee, this person serves as a liaison between the parent body, the committee, and the counsel (evaluator). The chairperson is responsible for overseeing the work of the committee, and during the hearings serves as a moderator, keeping the discussion on schedule and on purpose. The chairperson must have a keen interest in the work at hand, and have the ability to serve the interests of the parent body.

Counsel

Selected by and responsible to the chairperson, the counsel serves as head of the staff and is the main advisor to the committee. Working cooperatively with the chairperson, the counsel directs the background investigation, briefs committee members on technical matters, initiates questioning of witnesses, and directs preparation of the report.

When the evaluator assumes the role of counsel, he trades off some of his own autonomy for the greater involvement of the decision-makers. The evaluator, with his staff, works to complement the interests of the various committee members, and works more as a temporary employee of the committee than as an outside consultant.

Staff

Two types of staff may be needed to serve the committee. Clerical staff is used for correspondence, typing, and keeping of records (including the hearing transcripts). Professional staff carry out evaluative research, help select and prepare witnesses, and brief members on the witnesses to be called. Occasionally, a special study requiring outside consultants may be required.

Witnesses

Those called to testify and answer questions may be evaluators and staff, program personnel, representatives of interested groups, teachers, students, or "experts" in the area. Witnesses are selected by joint consideration of counsel, chairperson, and committee members.

Major Terms

Agenda

Prepared initially by the chief counsel, the agenda includes the list of witnesses to appear at the hearing, and the schedule of testimony and questioning.

Charge

The instructions to the committee from the parent body outlining the purpose, scope, and limits of their task. Too narrow a charge and the committee is not used to its potential; too vague a charge and the committee may wander aimlessly.

Cross-Examination

Witnesses may be questioned in order to test the strength of the evidence and opinions they offer, to look for weaknesses in the positions of other committee members, and to disclose information favorable to one's own position.

Final Report

Prepared by counsel and staff, the drafts of the final report are reviewed by committee members in working sessions. The final report summarizes the entire work of the committee's investigation and public hearing, and should complete the charge they were given. A minority report may be included if sufficient diversity of views still exist.

Investigation

The pre-hearing work of staff and counsel to discover the relevant issues, select appropriate witnesses, carry out background research, and serve the investigative needs of the committee members.

Questioning

Following opening statements, counsel may question witnesses to uncover the range of knowledge possessed, to identify salient points, and to set the stage for further questioning. A short time limit may be set on each committee member's questioning so that several rounds of questions can happen, thereby allowing for follow-up and cross-examination. There may also be a procedure for interested parties and the public to submit questions.

Rules

To be established early-on by the committee, the rules for the conduct of the hearing should ensure an orderly proceeding and guarantee "fair play" to the witnesses. Specifically, witnesses should be informed of the scope and generalizability of their testimony, as well as the level of technical questions they might expect.

In general, the more likely the hearing is to have a highly political or adversarial nature, the more comprehensive and strict the rules will have to be. (See the trial variation.)

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